

Teacher Brings the World into the Classroom for Lessons about Digital Citizenship in Rural Georgia

Students create relevant lessons for other pupils as they learn how to become responsible digital citizens

Vicki Davis, co-founder of the Digiteen™ Project, helped create this program to give students the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with other learners around the world in a safe environment. This connection with other cultures is especially important to Davis, who teaches in a small farming community. Participants work together to understand the aspects of being a responsible digital citizen, then share the skills and knowledge they acquire with peers and younger students at their own schools.

Vicki Davis, IT Director at Westwood Schools, is responsible for IT instruction and support at a small, private K-12 school in Camilla, Georgia, in the United States (U.S.). With 385 students, aged five to eighteen years, Westwood Schools serves a rural farming community with limited access to the Internet.

A graduate of Westwood Schools herself, Davis has always been interested in technology. She earned a degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology and was working as general manager for a local mobile phone company when she took a career break to become a stay-at-home mom. When her children started school, she went back into the workplace as a technology teacher at Westwood School.

Bringing Opportunities to a Rural Community

"We've got a great community and a wonderful school," says Davis. "The students can read and write and do math incredibly well, but we want them to go further—we want them to contribute to the world at large." Davis understands the role IT can play in helping students reach that goal. "The Internet is the greatest economic development tool ever invented for communities such as ours,

so I'm passionate about helping my students understand the opportunities it can present them," says Davis. "If they can spot change as soon as it happens, they'll be able to jump into new technologies quickly and take full advantage of the doors that will open for them in college and beyond."

Accessing important resources online can often be a challenge in a community such as Camilla, with many students having limited Internet access—only 50 percent have a broadband connection at home. The majority of the other students have slower dial-up connections or none at all. While most parents of Davis' students have at least some familiarity with the Internet, many fear for the safety of their children and don't allow them to have accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook®.

Raising Digital Citizens

Davis wanted her students to have as much access as possible to the Internet, but she realized that this alone was not enough to provide the opportunities and education needed in today's world. Students needed to learn how to use the technology in a responsible, constructive way that would



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For more information about Digiteen please visit - <http://www.digiteen.org>

To read Vicki's blog please visit - <http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com>

For more Microsoft resources on online safety please visit - <http://www.microsoft.com/protect>

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Vicki Davis, Teacher and IT Director,
Westwood Schools

expand their horizons safely and productively. While working with fellow teacher Julie Lindsay on a collaborative project, Davis saw a set of lessons on digital citizenship Lindsay had created for her students in Doha, Qatar. This was the beginning of Digiteen, an international project for teenagers that encourages them to behave appropriately and responsibly with regard to technology use. "No matter what safeguards you put into place, they will be more successful if students understand what it means to be responsible digital citizens," says Davis.

Peer Mentoring Is Better than a Textbook

"My objective is to teach my students how to use the language of a socially connected Internet and use new tools to expand their horizons," says Davis. "A lot of my students won't have the opportunity to travel much, but I can take them around the world with this project. They can compare the culture of China with the Middle East. They can talk about the different things that you do as you interact with people of different places. It's almost as if they've been there. Their peers in other countries are a much better source of information than a textbook."

A core part of the Digiteen project is the social network Davis and other participating teachers set up on Ning®, an online social platform that is popular with educators because it allows moderators to create and administer their own groups. According to Davis, students don't need much training or prompting to become active members of the Ning communities their teachers set up. They quickly become proficient, devising projects that address safety issues of which adults may not even be aware. For example, one group of students has created a campaign to educate their peers on the dangers of texting while driving a motor vehicle, while another group started a project called Super Social Safety, reviewing commercial Web sites targeted at elementary

school children and publishing the results on Twitter and a blog: <http://supersocialsafety.blogspot.com>.

Davis is pleased to see that Microsoft is committed to promoting online safety while supporting students in their online activities. "Our students link to the Microsoft Web site: www.microsoft.com/protect and use this as an online resource for their projects and research. Information such as keynotes, downloadable information and published studies are really useful for the students," says Davis.

Taking Down Walls Encourages Digital Citizenship

According to Davis, schools that don't allow their students to have this type of social networking experience are putting up walls. "They are missing an opportunity for the children to learn from one another about each other's cultures before their world view is set," says Davis. She believes this is especially important in a small community where access to media outlets and other information can be limited to television. "The things that participants learn about each other would not be so powerful if I just stood in front of the classroom and said them. It's a teacher's dream moment when you see students no longer stereotyping, being more accepting of one another."

Davis has seen her students benefit from participating in the Digiteen project in other ways, too. One of her tenth-grade students currently writes for Terry Freedman, a prominent UK educational technologist and advisor of the Flat Classroom™ Project, another online project using Web 2.0 tools such as Wikispaces and Ning to join classes together virtually. "She's been contributing since ninth grade, when she was 14," says Davis. "Freedman works in the United Kingdom. That's an opportunity that would not be available to a student in Camilla without these types of collaborative projects."